

One college will have video games teach some classes, not professors

By Star Tribune, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.13.14

Word Count **662**



Devin Krauter, 17, plays the game "Gears of War 2" on the Xbox 360 at his home in Fargo, North Dakota, in 2008. Now, a Minnesota college is experimenting with using video games for business classes. Photo: AP Photo/Dave Kolpack

MINNEAPOLIS — Business students at one college soon will have a new, more fun way to earn credits. But students won't learn from teachers. Instead, they'll learn by playing computer games.

Rasmussen College in Bloomington, Minnesota, is a for-profit college. Some colleges just try to cover their costs. However, Rasmussen aims to make money from education. It offers degrees at campuses and online.

Last week Rasmussen announced that beginning in July it will offer courses based on games. They will be a choice in its Associate Degree in Business Management. The program lasts for two years.

More Fun, Lower Cost

Rasmussen calls the program Flex Choice. School officials say the new option could make learning more fun. It could also save students as much as \$14,000 in tuition. That would save a student nearly half the cost of the associate degree.

To help design online business courses in the program, Rasmussen hired a gaming company called GarageGames.

In some cases, students will play a series of games to show how well they've mastered the course material. Games will test how well they know computer programs used at companies, for instance. Or, they'll measure how students handle customer complaints. If they ace the games, they get credit for the course.

"We know that games are fun," said Matthew Petz of Rasmussen. But studies suggest that they're also a good way to motivate students and help them learn.

A New Twist

The move is part of a new direction in education that not everyone supports. It's known as "competency-based education." Instead of focusing as much on teaching, it aims more to measure "outcomes" — what, exactly, the students have learned.

The idea, said Petz, is to allow students to "show what they know." In some cases, it may allow students to complete their degrees more quickly.

But the gaming technology adds a new twist.

One course, Customer Loyalty and Retention, teaches students how to speak with a company's customers. Students will play a computer game to test their ability to handle customer complaints. Faced with an unhappy caller, for example, they're asked to choose from a list of possible responses including: "We don't do that, ma'am." Or they may say "I assure you we wouldn't try to trick you." Or, "I understand it can be confusing."

Depending on the answers, the game grades their performance and gives feedback, said Timothy Loatman. He runs technology education services for Rasmussen.

"Mastering the game is certainly a way to prove and hone the skills," he said.

A Risky Way To Learn?

The Rasmussen plan, though, is likely to meet some doubts. One reason why is that some of the courses don't have teachers. Instead of teachers, students will be assigned "coaches." These coaches are not experts in the subject matter, says Petz. Their job is to help support students in their studies.

David Weerts, a professor of higher education at the University of Minnesota, said that gaming technology can be useful for teaching some skills. But he said he was cautious about this new system. The risk, he said, is jumping into such a program without proof "that people are gaining something from this."

Nancy Black, a professor at Metro State University, was even more doubtful. "Where is the teaching in this?" said Black. She's president of a union group of professors from Minnesota state universities. Black questioned how a computer game could test a student's judgment skills. She's especially concerned that there's "no faculty whatsoever."

Rasmussen officials point out that students will have to take some "faculty-led" classes in order to earn their degree. They also say they tested the idea first with 250 students.

But Petz says the timing is right for this change. "It really does cut time and money off a student's program," he said. "We want to make sure that we build in those job-based skills that employers want, students want, and we've got to do it in a way that students can afford."